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Celebrating North Carolina's Local Foods  
From the Foothills to the Coast

**The Simple Joy of a Tomato**

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# Ridgeway Cantaloupes

BY NANCIE MCDERMOTT AND ROB LEHMANN

**D**riving along a winding Piedmont North Carolina two-lane blacktop sometime in the early 1980's, I remember a large, hand-lettered cardboard sign, all by itself with no one in sight. Its message, "Western Lopes" made me pull over at once. The abbreviation tickled me, then and now. Spelled variously as canteloupe, cantaloupe, and cantalope, the one true name for this summertime delight remains unsettled. The simplicity of the nickname, lopes, cuts through the rules to the subject at hand: a plain distinctive melon which graces Southern plates during the heights of summertime heat. Watermelon had my heart back when eating off the big messy rind and spitting out the seeds

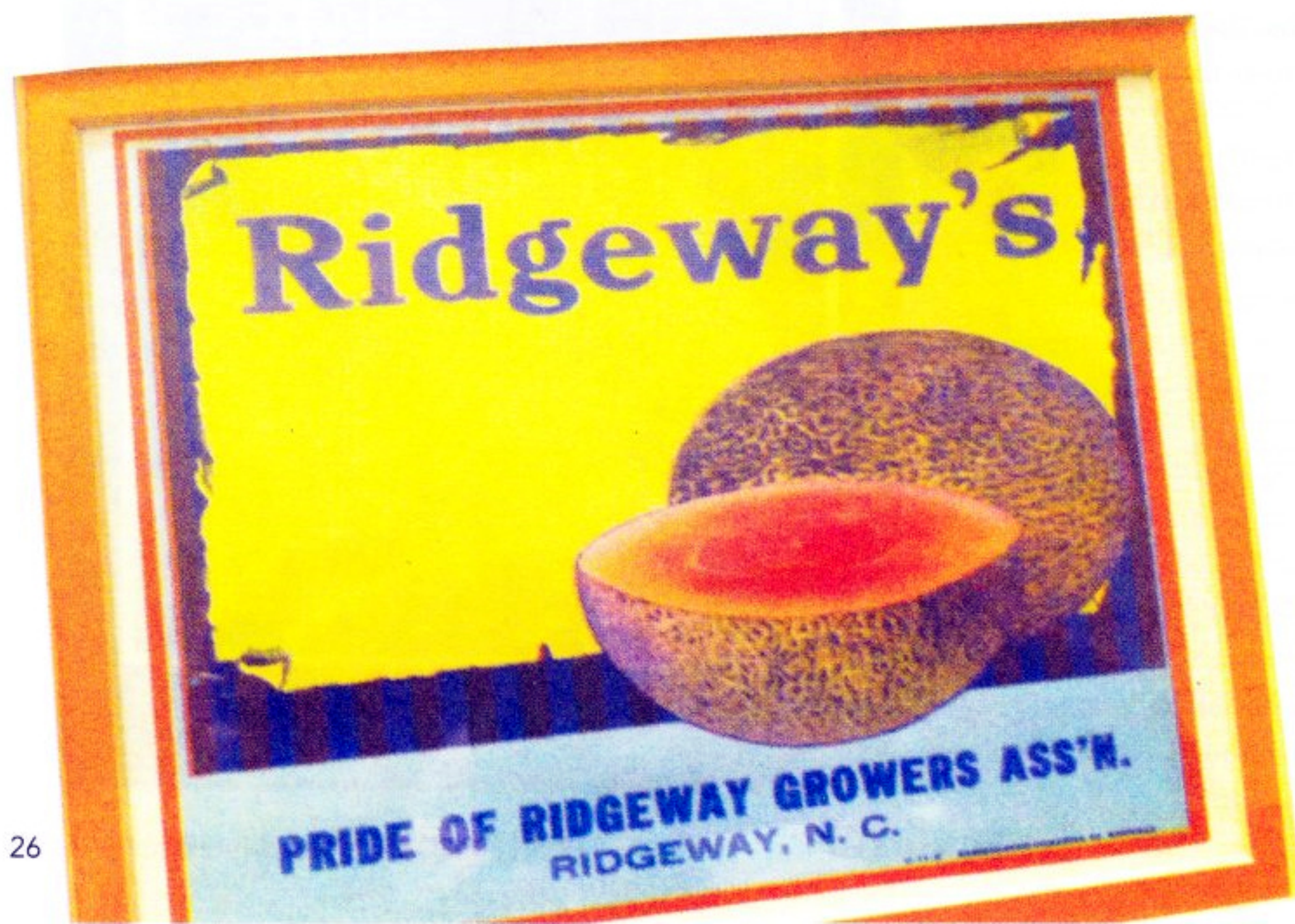
mattered more than flavor; today I am simultaneously a cantaloupe devotee.

Make that a muskmelon maven, a rock melon recruit, or perhaps a Persian melon person, since each of these names belongs to this particular fruit; while cantaloupe, in all its spellings, properly and officially, does not. But the mistake was made long ago, a century at least, and with our nationwide affection for these small round melons, enclosed in their sturdy rind adorned with the distinctive curling grey-green texture called netting, we've claimed the name for good. Cantaloupes they are, and from July through early September, North Carolina in particular loves her 'lopes.

Native to Iran and traced back to the gardens and tables of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, *Cucumis melo* var. *cantalupensis* is closely kin to cucumbers and winter melons. Like tomatoes, which are technically fruits at home amongst the vegetables, cantaloupes are vegetables at home amongst the fruits. Sweet plump melons found favor in Armenia and made their way around Europe throughout the Common Era. A variety planted in the papal gardens near the Italian city of Cantalupo around the sixteenth century earned the name we know today, and various cantaloupe cousins still remain hot-weather stars in France and Spain.

Melons receive notice in Southern historical accounts of culinary pleasures from colonial times forward, but we can thank the W. Atlee Burpee Company for bringing the particular 'lopes we love to the marketplace in 1881, when the Netted Gem showed up in their catalogs and found favor, particularly in Colorado, which leads production today. They also took root in the North Carolina town of Ridgeway, located in Warren County, a little ways south of the Virginia border and north of Henderson.

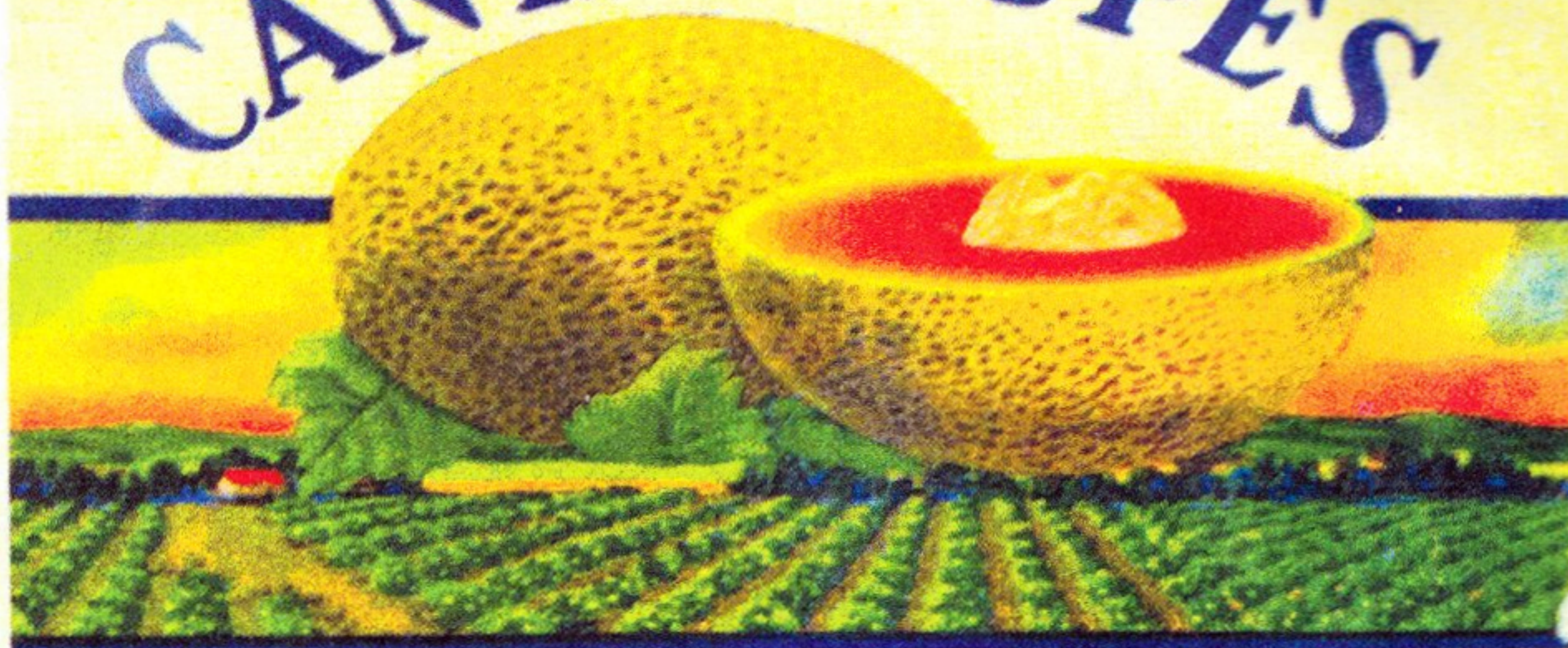
Ridgeway NC, incorporated in 1869, drew a substantial community of farmers from Germany during the 1880's, and their descendants still work the land to this day. Their first task was transforming Ridgeway's soil, depleted by too many years of monocropping cotton, into rich fertile farmland.





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This first generation of immigrants employed traditional agricultural methods to revitalize the soil, and planted a variety of cover crops, including clover, cowpeas and other legumes. Soon, Ridgeway's agricultural reputation was growing, with dewberries, beans, tobacco, and sweet potatoes in the lead.

Around 1900, local farmers began supplementing their standard flourishing crops by putting in cantaloupe seeds, and the resulting melons quickly found favor far and wide for their deep, pleasing flavor and sweetness. The establishment of railway links to Richmond via the Raleigh-Gaston Railroad enabled Ridgeway's distinguished crop to put the

town on the map. In the early 20th century, Ridgeway cantaloupes were named on the menus at New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and filled railroad cars heading up and down the East Coast. The early 1940's saw 13,000 crates shipped per season, while the 1956 harvest tallied 30,000 crates shipped nationally by refrigerated train cars and tractor-trailer trucks.

The sun set on Ridgeway's cantaloupe glory days in the late 1950's, when a succession of rain-drenched summers caused entire crops to rot before reaching their markets. Melon blights destroyed entire fields and marketing challenges took their toll on the once-

thriving business. Ridgeway agriculture continued humming on livestock and crops of tobacco, soybeans, and grain, but the Ridgeway cantaloupe reverted to the local treasure it had always been.

Lucy and Wallace Holtzmann belong to a generation of Ridgeway's citizens with first-hand knowledge of the times when cantaloupe ruled Ridgeway's economy and warm-weather life. Both grew up helping their families with age-appropriate tasks. These included assembling thousands of cantaloupe crates, ordered from Murfreesboro and ready to assemble throughout the season. They stirred flour



## AUNT EDITH'S CANTALOUPE PRESERVES

Aunt Edith still delights her family and friends with her cooking and energetic spirits, at 87 years of age. This recipe for her famous cantaloupe preserves is hand-written on a piece of paper in the Holzmann family kitchen.

1 cup sugar

2 cups cut-up cantaloupe

1 cut-up lemon, or a little lemon juice

Cook down over medium-low heat for 3–4 hours, until it thickens.

To complete this recipe: Cool to room temperature. Transfer to clean jars and refrigerate for about 2 weeks. Or follow instructions for canning the preserves using the boiling water method.

and water into a simple sturdy paste which they brushed onto the backs of gorgeous labels, which included Ridgeway Special, Cream of Ridgeway, and Pride of Ridgeway, among others.

"We mixed that stuff up, brushed it on, and it stayed there, too!" Mr. Holtzmann remembers with a chuckle. Mrs. Holzmann recalls stamping identifying information for particular farms onto the front and back sides of full crates as they lumbered along a conveyor belt, headed for train cars. She was sent off to bed at a reasonable hour, but the operation continued 24-hours a day during the height of the season, mid-July through late August.

Richard Holzmann, Jr. still farms the land first turned and tilled by his great grandfather. His main crops are soybeans and grain, but he proudly grows three acres of cantaloupes and sells his crop at the family produce stand, right out on U.S. Highway #1 South in Ridgeway, throughout the season. He plants four times to ensure an ongoing crop while the sun shines just right on Ridgeway. Even so, he sometimes sells out a day's worth of cantaloupes by noon. He still plants the original old-time varieties, as well as hybrids, so he has plenty of melons on hand throughout the season.


He and his sister Linda Holzmann Seeley remember labeling crates for their family, as well. "We got paid in 'culls'—the cantaloupes which were too ripe to be shipped," they recall. "We took them out front by the side of the road and sold them each morning, and then worked in tobacco at night!"

Their father, who retired a few years ago, advises those in searching for a ripe cantaloupe out in the fields to look for color. When the green is turning to gray, that's the perfect

time. The stem should slip right off with just a little push of the thumb. Mr. Richard Holtzmann, Sr., notes that what's shipped commercially today must be picked green, two weeks early or more. These melons will never ripen up the way vine-ripened cantaloupes do.

Organized in 2004, the Ridgeway Historical Society has been preserving the town's rich, proud agricultural history. Mrs. Lucy Holzmann and a team of dedicated Ridgeway folks launched the Ridgeway Cantaloupe Festival in 2005 as a way to celebrate the past and nourish the community now and in the future. The first festival saw 750–1000 people gathered, with 20 vendors on hand. Last year's festival drew some 3,000 people from near and far, with 67 vendors providing food, entertainment, education, and diversion all day long. They offer two music stages: one for country and bluegrass, and the other for "...what the younger people like." The third Saturday in July is the standing date, and the location is right on US Highway #1 in the heart of Ridgeway—you can't miss it. You'll find Mr. Richard Holzmann's produce stand along the road, as well, and it's open throughout the summer. Stop by, say hello, and see if you can take home a taste of Ridgeway 2013. *eP*

Nancie McDermott of Chapel Hill and Rob Lehmann of Warrenton are North Carolina natives and lifelong friends. They share a fascination with food and history, and consider a day of gathering information, finding ingredients, and cooking and eating for hours to be a very good day.



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## Ridgeway Cantaloupe Festival

Presented by the Ridgeway Historical Society, Inc. and the Ridgeway Volunteer Fire Department

Date: July 20, 2013

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Location: 660 US Highway #1 South/#158, Ridgeway, NC